

**HISTORY
STINKS**



**POO
THROUGH
THE
AGES**

SUZIE EDGE

INTRODUCTION



This book is full of poo, and guess what? It stinks! (The poo, I mean, not the book. Unless something has gone very wrong at your local bookshop.)

But why on earth would anyone want to read a book that's full of poo, I hear you ask? Well, if you hold your nose and ignore the smell, poo can teach you a lot. Humans poo every day – and we've done so throughout our history – so there's plenty of it sloshing about in the murkiest corners of our past. The story of how we've dealt with poo through the ages – from the foul-smelling ancient Romans to the whiffy Vikings to



pongy present-day folk – can tell us all about how we once lived.

You also might be wondering: **why does this author love talking about poo so much?** It's a fair question! Well, as a medical doctor, I'm interested in human bodies and have known about the importance of poo health for years. **I also love history.** Poo can tell us so much about our ancestors and how they looked after their bodies as well as how they built their homes and cities. **So for me, poo plus history is the perfect combination!**



DID YOU KNOW?

Just in case you were wondering what exactly poo is – it's what's left over after the process of digestion, which is your body's way of breaking down food and giving you the energy you need to live. Poo

is mostly made up of water, but it also contains all those bits of food your body hasn't quite managed to absorb, as well as dead blood cells, which give it its famous brown colour.

And why does it smell? Well, that comes from bacteria that break down food during digestion. Thanks, bacteria!

Poo has many different names, from poops and plops to dung and doo-doo. But no matter what it's called, we have always had to get rid of it. Poo can spread diseases, and it doesn't matter who you are – humble servant or legendary king or queen – anyone can get sick from poo. It has caused all sorts of trouble in places where people have lived close together, from the busiest cities to army camps, to ships belonging to famous explorers and even outer space. *Pesky poo gets everywhere!*



So, it's about time we lift the (toilet) lid on the stinkiest, pongiest, smelliest and grossest corners of humanity's poo-tastic history, and ask the biggest, ploppiest questions you all want answered, such as: How many Romans did it take to do a poo together? What did the Tudors use to wipe their bums? How did people in medieval times get rid of their muck?

AND MUCH MORE.

We will even learn how our ancestors used poo for good and discover how looking after our poo could help us look after the planet in the future. Now, there's no more holding it in, it's time to grab some loo roll – and possibly a peg for your nose – **WE'RE GOING IN!**

CHAPTER ONE:

ROMAN REARS AND TOILET TROUBLES

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your bottom brush! We're all going to the toilet together in ancient Rome. Everything you've ever wanted to know about Romans and their pooing and farting habits is here. I would hold my nose if I were you – there is a serious *STINKUS MAXIMUS* about the place! Oh, and if you don't have a bottom brush to lend me, then don't worry, I'm sure there'll be one lying around somewhere. (And if you don't know what one of those is, all will be revealed!)



EMPEROR CLAUDIUS AND THE TRAPPED WIND

Before we empty our bowels, let's set the scene. The Roman Empire was an ancient state that had control over most of the people in Europe, the north of Africa and the west of Asia, from the first to the fifth centuries CE.* *It was truly MASSIVE!*

- The empire was ruled by mighty emperors, one of whom was Claudius, who was the fourth to take charge, way back in 41 CE. Clever Claudius was known for building giant aqueducts – huge structures that moved water from the hills to the cities – as well as canals that helped move people and goods around.

All pretty impressive stuff, right? RIGHT! But even emperors have to deal with pesky bum trouble every now and then. For instance, one time Claudius held a lavish feast to celebrate all the building work that had

*CE stands for COMMON ERA, and is an alternative to AD (ANNO DOMINI).

been going on in his empire. All was going fantastically well – the meat and fish were delicious and the wine was top notch! (What else would you expect when you're dining with an emperor?)

However, one of the guests, a senator, had a little bit of a problem. All that fancy food had made him *desperate* to pass wind, but he couldn't possibly risk offending the emperor by making a noise or a nasty smell. So instead of letting it out, he simply held it in. As you know, that's never a good idea. Gases started building and building inside him until he nearly popped like a **GIANT, SMELLY BALLOON!**



The emperor Claudius heard the commotion the senator was making and when he was told what was happening, announced that he would allow the passing of wind at the dinner table to ease the pressure. **PHEW!** Everyone was very relieved and they all relaxed. What a noise – and smell – they must have made!



DISCLAIMER: I CAN'T GUARANTEE THIS STORY WILL LET YOU OFF THE HOOK IF YOU DECIDE TO PASS WIND AT YOUR DINNER TABLE!

WHERE WOULD YOU GO TO POO IN ANCIENT ROME?

But what if the senator needed to do more than just pass wind? What if he needed a POO? It was all right for Claudius – he would have had his own private latrine to visit, but not everyone had that luxury. It



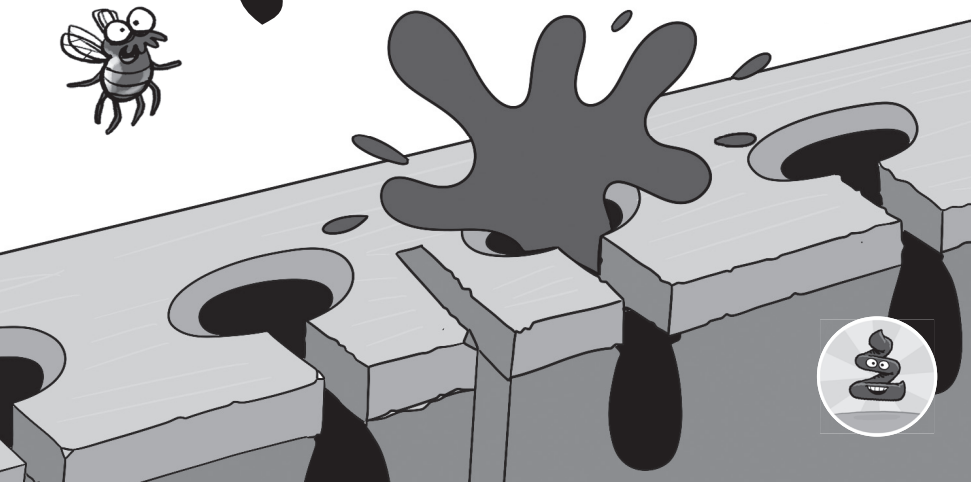
sounds a bit weird to us, but the senator might have had to go with other ancient Romans, in public toilets called **foricae**.



Foricae were long, rectangular rooms built alongside public baths. They had benches running around three of the walls (shown below), set over trenches of running water. Holes were cut out on the top of the benches for people to sit over and, well, let it *all* out.



PLOP!





On a cold day you might have wanted to pay someone to sit there for a while to warm it up before you needed to go. (Although, maybe the thought of someone else's bum cheeks warming up the toilet is not that appealing to you, which is fair enough!) There were no cubicles in the **foricae** and very little privacy – unless you were wearing a large toga or tunic you could wrap around yourself. Some **foricae** could have held more than twenty people all going at the same time, but one of the biggest, in Julius Caesar's forum, could hold fifty. That's a serious amount of public pooers!



QUICK QUESTION

If you had to sit next to someone on the toilet, what would you say to break the tension? Perhaps you could tell a joke:

*What did the poo say to the fart?
You BLOW me away!*

THE CLEANING SPONGE (IT'S AS DISGUSTING AS IT SOUNDS)

The holes in the *foricae* weren't just for people to sit over – they also extended down the front, so that you could reach under and, well, **wipe your bum!** Instead of loo roll – which they hadn't got round to inventing – ancient Romans used a special stick with a sponge on the end. (I told you we would talk about bum brushes!) The stick was called a *xylospogium* or a *tersorium*, which means 'the wiping thing'. (I hope the sponge never fell off the stick while you were wiping . . . ouch!)



You would find the *tersorium* in a bucket filled with vinegar or soured wine in the middle of the room. When you were done cleaning, you would rinse the sponge in the channel of cleaner water that ran



in front of the benches and put it back in the bucket for whoever needed to use it next.



WHAT'S BROWN AND STICKY?

A STICK!



It can't have been that easy to wash the poo off the *tersorium* – anything left behind such as bacteria or parasites might easily jump from bum to bum.

So, it was probably best not to look too closely at what might be sticking to the bum brush!

Things weren't quite as clean in the public toilets as the farting senator might have hoped. They were dark, dirty, dung-filled places, full of rats and snakes that loved to hang out there amongst all the stinking waste.

WHAT A PLACE TO PLOP!



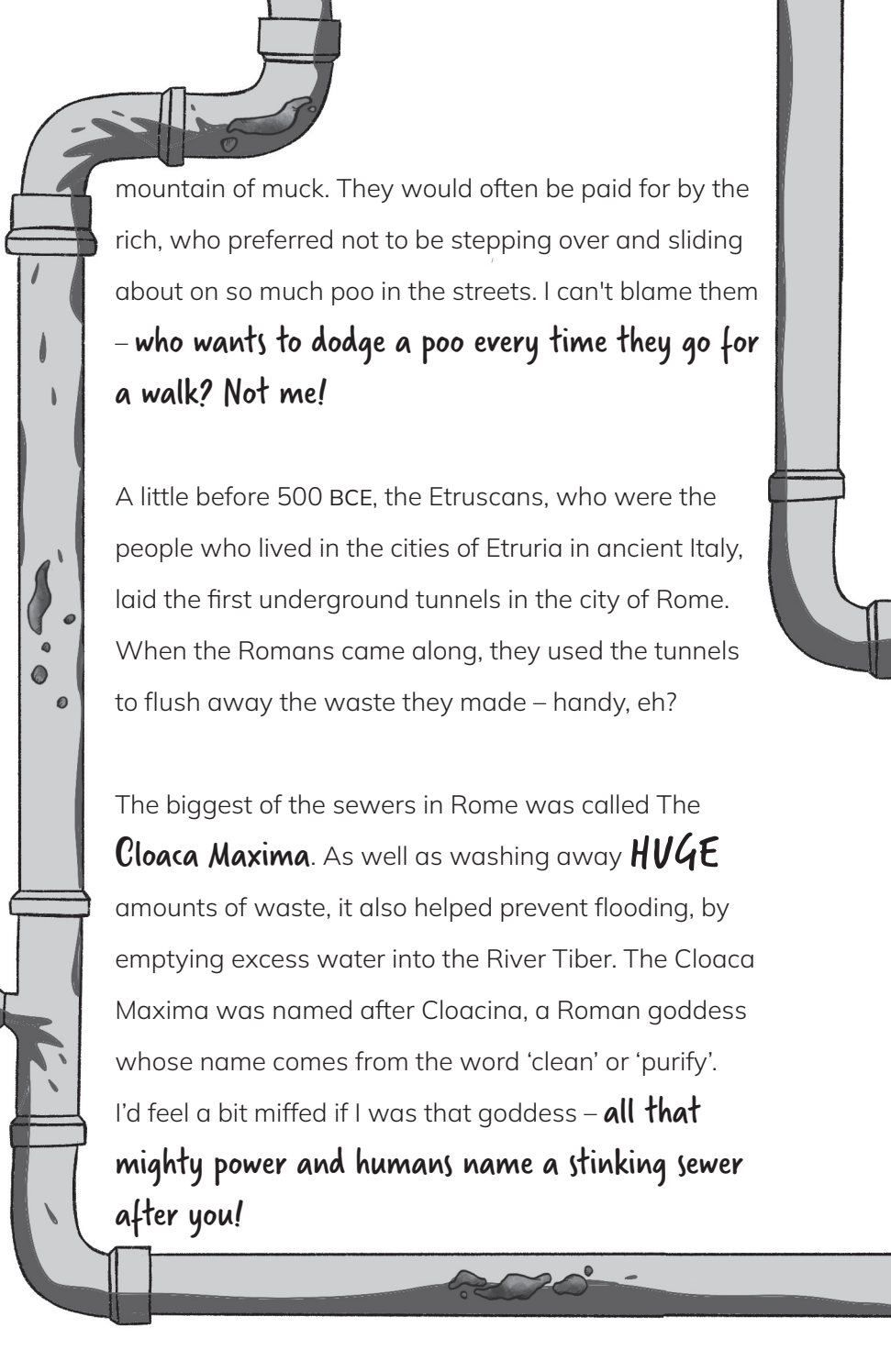
JUST WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL THAT POO?

Outside, the Roman city streets were covered with animal dung and wee, all kinds of rubbish and lots of stagnant, filthy water. There was human poo and pee too, because poorer Romans had no toilets in their homes. Instead, they would empty chamber pots in public places or even poo in street corners (we'll hear more about chamber pots in chapter six). Houses and shops would have had an enormous load of waste and there would have been lots of flies buzzing about, sampling the goods. *Imagine the stench!*



But even though they were a bit grim, public toilets would have at least helped to reduce some of this





mountain of muck. They would often be paid for by the rich, who preferred not to be stepping over and sliding about on so much poo in the streets. I can't blame them – **who wants to dodge a poo every time they go for a walk? Not me!**

A little before 500 BCE, the Etruscans, who were the people who lived in the cities of Etruria in ancient Italy, laid the first underground tunnels in the city of Rome. When the Romans came along, they used the tunnels to flush away the waste they made – handy, eh?

The biggest of the sewers in Rome was called The **Cloaca Maxima**. As well as washing away **HUGE** amounts of waste, it also helped prevent flooding, by emptying excess water into the River Tiber. The Cloaca Maxima was named after Cloacina, a Roman goddess whose name comes from the word 'clean' or 'purify'. I'd feel a bit miffed if I was that goddess – **all that mighty power and humans name a stinking sewer after you!**



DID YOU KNOW?


In 100 CE, the city of Rome boasted a million inhabitants. It's estimated they were producing around 90,000 kg of poo every couple of days – which is roughly equivalent to the weight of a blue whale!



IT'S A TOUGH JOB, BUT SOMEONE'S GOT TO DO IT!

With all that poo sloshing about, every so often the Roman toilets and sewers would need cleaning. Cleaners, who were most likely slaves or prisoners, would have to go down there with shovels and brushes to clean away the poo that was stuck to the sides and floors. You know, the ones that didn't flush away properly. **BARF!** What a job!





In toilets without running water underneath, poo would simply drop into a big pit. When that happened, someone had the job of getting it all out and carting it away. These lucky people were called ***stercorarii***.


They would have to take the poo to use it as a fertiliser, spreading it over gardens and fields to help crops grow. We can still see the remains of many Roman public toilets and sewer systems today.

They can be found all over the former Roman Empire, from Rome in Italy to the north of England. Say what you want about those ancient Romans, but you can't deny they were big on poo!

EXPLODING TOILETS

(YES, YOU HEARD, EXPLODING TOILETS)

One thing Romans needed to watch out for was exploding toilets. Rotting poo gives off hydrogen sulphide and methane, both of which are highly flammable gases. If there was a spark, then the noxious, stinking gases could



ignite and there could be a massive POO EXPLOSION!

PRRRRP!

With the help of the *stercorarii* and the running water underneath the *foricae*, they could get rid of the poo rather than just let it sit waiting to blow. Poo generally ended up in the River Tiber, which wasn't ideal, as people used the river as a water supply and to wash.

QUICK QUESTION

When you went for a bath in the river, you might have seen your own poo go floating by. Do you think you would recognise yours? Is your poo:

Curly?

Straight?

Zig-zag? (In which case, you might want to see someone about that!)



THE HUNGRY OCTOPUS

It was good for Romans to have sewer systems that linked toilets and houses to the waterways, but sometimes it was good for other creatures, too. Whilst poo went one way, sometimes animals could come up the other.

In the ancient city of Puteoli, there was a large house owned by a wealthy merchant. At night, when everything was quiet and the family were asleep in their beds, a **GIANT OCTOPUS** would sneak along the sewer, up through the hole in the toilet and into the house, where it would slither its way to the kitchen and help itself to the pickled fish stored there.

The family's servants would try and fight off the invader but it was too quick for them, diving back down into the sewers with a belly full of stolen fish. I hope it kept an eye out for any poop dropping on its head if anyone needed to use the toilet while it was there!



